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SUBJECT: ROMANIA'S ETHNIC HUNGARIANS: A CRUCIAL SWING VOTE

Classified By: DCM JERI GUTHRIE-CORN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The opposition Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) is positioning itself as kingmaker for the upcoming Presidential elections. UDMR expects its candidate, Kelemen Hunor, to win approximately seven percent of the popular vote in the November 22 first round. The party will then instruct its constituents how to vote in the December 6 runoff. UDMR's goals are to position itself to return to Government and to obtain support for enhanced local autonomy in exchange for ethnic Hungarian votes. While party leaders are increasingly frustrated with President Basescu and the governing Liberal Democrats (PDL), they are likely to support the candidate who offers the best deal. End Summary.

12. (SBU) "The Hungarian community wants us back in government, but only under certain conditions," UDMR President Marko Bela told foreign diplomats at a November 9 meeting. "We need an adequate program for minorities and a solution to the economic crisis." After twelve years in government, the party was left out of the ruling coalition following the November 2008 parliamentary elections. Since then, economic conditions in the already-poor majority Hungarian counties of Harghita, Covasna and Mures have worsened and, as an opposition party, the UDMR has been unable to garner patronage or government projects for those areas. Nevertheless, Romania's 600,000 ethnic Hungarians are expected to unify around the UDMR at election time, as they have in the past.

13. (SBU) Enhanced local autonomy remains the central tenet of the UDMR platform, and the party will push the Presidential finalists to support that goal in exchange for the ethnic Hungarian vote. UDMR has previously been either unwilling or unable to define autonomy in concrete terms, but candidate Kelemen (N.B. his family name - most Hungarians list their surname first) has identified some benchmarks, such as devolving more decision-making authority to the local level and increasing the proportion of income tax receipts available to local government. Other thorny issues remain: establishment of a state-supported autonomous Hungarian-language university in the city of Cluj; declaration of Hungarian as an official language for the region; and passage of a law on national minorities.

14. (C) Marko and senior UDMR member Laszlo Borbely told the assembled diplomats the UDMR would decide whom to support only after the first round, with no negotiations before that November 22 vote. In the meantime, Marko will cede the public spotlight to Kelemen, 42, a colorless intellectual from Cluj and an MP since 2000. (Note: Marko reportedly prefers Kelemen as his eventual successor over the more experienced Borbely. Marko's decision to tap Kelemen was designed to strengthen the latter's position among party stalwarts. End Note.)

COMMENT: WHOM WILL UDMR SUPPORT?

15. (C) If President Basescu advances to the second round, which seems almost certain, UDMR will face a difficult choice. While party leaders perceive Basescu as not unfriendly to ethnic Hungarian interests, they are disappointed with his dictatorial style and with PDL's failure to deliver on minority issues. Following the

collapse of the Boc government the UDMR criticized Basescu,s Prime Minister designates, Lucian Croitoru and Liviu Negoita, for not addressing minority concerns in their proposed governing programs. UDMR leaders are also disappointed in Basescu,s push for the non-binding referendum for a unicameral Parliament, which they fear will reduce the number of minority Parliamentarians. Kelemen's statement to the media last week that he would support PNL candidate Crin Antonescu over Basescu in a runoff reflected this disappointment, but it may have been premature. If the past is any guide, the UDMR will go with the candidate who offers the best deal, and that could still be Basescu.

GITENSTEIN